## Voices for Interactive Choice and Empowerment (VOICE)

## CRISIS AND NEED: INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY IN DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES RUNS THROUGH A PARADOX

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The information and technology gap and related inequities between industrialized and developing nations are widening: a new type of poverty - information poverty - looms. Most developing countries, especially the least developed countries are not sharing in the communications revolution*. (UN, 1998)*

There is no denying the fact that information and communication technology (ICT) has been recognized as an important tool for socio-economic development. Socio-economic development was earlier limited to providing services from top-down approaches to the communities who are less privileged, poor and disadvantaged. This top-down approach proved ineffective in the development sector. Along with many other features and diversities in development activities, there is evidence that ICT can play a very significant role in the development of disadvantaged groups in society. However, the corporate sector is dominant in terms of ICT and its emergence in the development sector is still in its infancy.

ICT has become a new powerful tool in the economic and information sectors, which create enormous opportunities for growth and poverty reduction. Access to technology is seen as recognition for the right of the people to have access to and control over information and knowledge. ICT has also become a powerful tool to control people and the profit motives of the corporate sector still dominate without having any development approach. It has also created an enormous divide and an 'information underclass', which fosters discrimination and division between people and society.

In recent times, the world economy is taking new shifts greater than that of any time in history. The new economic order brings profound transformation and changes, and the process of corporate globalization has accelerated the transformation of many aspects of socio-economic conditions, including the transformation of information and knowledge. New global forces are emerging and expanding their territory by creating new markets of capital and goods at the same time. The corporate sectors are not always concerned with social contributions, but with making money using

technology and expanding their market territory. Even the rules of World Trade Organizations (WTO) favour the developed and corporate sector by treating services as goods and encouraging privatization and competition. The ground is still uneven, and in the case of technological advancement we need to consider where the result goes, to the corporate or the poor, to the development or to the profit. The corporations in recent years have been at least showing interest in the development of social sectors. Are they all fake interests? How far their approach is pro-people is questionable and needs to be observed.

In fact, however we define the 'age of information', it may be more applicable to the developed, not the developing countries. The masses in poor countries, especially Bangladesh, are still unaware what ICT is or how it can provide benefit to income generating or other improvements of the people. In urban areas, middle class educated people, farm businesses and young people are concerned with the normal use of technology and about its advancement. Thus, even in Bangladesh and other similar countries ICT has already created a social divide. It has spawned the divide between urban and rural, between men and women, between rich and poor, between educated and illiterate - rather than reducing the gaps. The digital divide combines a few phenomena together e.g. language divide, income divide, gender divide, education divide, urban-rural divide, access and facilities divide, etc. For example, there are some alarming differences e.g. all the developing countries of the world own a mere 4% of the world's computers, and 75% of the world's 700 million telephone sets can be found in nine richest countries. The digital divide is pervading gradually not only between the North-South but within individual countries. The growth pattern of ICT is extremely uneven and thus the differences are increasing despite efforts to reduce the gaps. Statistics still show an enormous growing digital divide. For example, over half of the households in the USA own computers, compared to less than 1% in Africa. **(ITU, 2000)**

About 77 million computers in the USA have valid Internet addresses, while in Bangladesh, Angola, Chad and Syria fewer than ten computers are linked to the Internet. Denmark has the highest concentration of e-mail users at 73.4% of its population, South Korea stands out among Asian Countries. The digital divide is not limited with computer only, it also covers communication technologies and so forth. In the world 8% of the people have never made a phone call. **(Digital Dividends, 2001).** Bangladesh has only 3 land line phones for every 1000 people, while India has 32 for every 1000 people. And in the whole region mobile phones range from between four to one per 1000 in the whole south Asia region. Bhutan has 1.2 internet hosts per 1000 people while others don't have any. This also carries gender disparity because the line holders are almost male, and women have little access to the lines. However, New York has more telephone connections that all of rural Asia. London has more Internet accounts than the whole of Africa. The Internet connects 100 million computers that represent 2% of the world population.

Language is another main barrier which also increases the divide. English dominates the web since 80% of all web sites are in English. Major computer manufactures are from English speaking nations, and modern computers are the products of western innovations. At present 96% of e-commerce sites are in English and 64% of secure servers are located in the USA. **(Bridges 2001).**

The major phenomenon in future development is that international aid agencies are showing an interest in promoting ICT based knowledge and development. The agenda is certainly owned by them, not by the people it intends to help. Is this agenda participative build up for development? Not at all, but the corporate sectors find it offers potential for their expansion, so there may be development as well to some extent. Similarly, governments and NGOs are becoming increasingly enthusiastic for generating rural development from ICT. There is no doubt that ICT has much more potential for development activities, but we need to work out how to develop the potential with an approach that views the development of the disadvantaged and society equally, without any divide and discrimination.

We in the developing countries still can't exploit ICT successfully for our own advantage. We need to extend services and ensure the rights of citizens to have access to ICT, and to have this recognized by the constitution and international human rights charter.

ICT facilitates access to information, which is a right for every citizen, and creates opportunities to use it to help in reducing poverty and empowering the less empowered. There are many best practices where ICT contributes a lot to social development, reducing poverty, making people aware, facilitating access to information and knowledge, and empowering people and so on. But in Bangladesh ICT doesn't bring much good to the people although there are a few examples which are mostly cited in any paper written on the issue. For example, the Grameen telephone service both of mobile and village phones. At the same time it should be kept in mind that the generally urban educated and middle class people use the mobile phone service, not the rural. Also Grameen has the programme of providing village phone services to rural women, which is a good initiative. But still, the village phones are used mainly by businessmen. Of course, the poor and the businessmen are both getting benefit from the phone. But so far this service reaches only 10,000 among 130 million people in Bangladesh. Customer service is very poor, and the rights of customers are often violated. It is not the breaking the monopoly of the state owned telecommunications services, rather it is facilitating a new form of monopoly which is greatly creating discrimination. Therefore, we need to look outside the country if things are to improve. We need to concentrate on how the poor and disadvantaged groups, the real untouched, can be provided with access to and control over the resources so that they can have a sustainable life and livelihood, rather than creating crisis in life.

There are many aspects where ICT can contribute positively. A few things can be mentioned which show that ICT can provide a voice to the voiceless, facilitating access to information and improving access to basic services and rights. It can also promote awareness and increase the impact of health and education interventions. This also gives voices to the poor and less empowered, and creates demand for the right to effective communication to different sectors of society.

ICT can be used as a means for business reorganization, providing decentralization and on-line procurement of inputs. It can boost efficiency and productivity in the manufacturing and distribution sectors and make markets more efficient, and with customer services. It can reduce transaction and transport costs and barriers, and be a tool for reducing poverty through earnings. It can facilitate information and thus provide knowledge, and can reduce gender discrimination and other forms of digital divide. Above all, ICT can promote innovation and creativity.

Some forms of ICT (e.g. community radio, community television) can play a significant role in preserving and providing access to cultural resources. They can promote the traditions and heritage of ethnic and marginalized groups and help to keep their language, indigenous knowledge and way of life and livelihood alive and active.

Although in developing countries ICT is yet to reach to the most of the people, urban people, especially in business sectors, and some IT training and educational institutes are using and demonstrating the new tools. Until these changes can reach most of the people, especially the disadvantaged, however we describe development is false, a paradox between theory and practice.

ICT has broken the barriers and boundaries and it opens up a door for doing things with more cost effectively and less time consumption. However, it is notably important that ICT has been spreading its spirit and widening its periphery every moment and thus creating digital divides. It is developing a sort of concentration of power and marginalizing the disadvantaged groups of the society.

The remedy rests with the policy environment - how to find the best uses of ICT at all levels. This is a matter for the policy initiatives taken by global powers. This also a matter of exploration on how ICT is playing greater role in constituting economic growth of a person or of a farm. If development organizations can change their approaches and facilitate ICT access for ordinary people rather than

for only business organizations the poor and disadvantaged would benefit. Rural Communities are still far behind in comparison with world progress. Thus, what is required is some raising of their awareness of how ICT can help them. Therefore, this is the time to think about bridging the gap through policy formulating, and through implementing policies properly to meet pragmatic needs. This will eliminate the crisis where paradoxes no longer exist.